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Creativity in the Age of COVID: Honors Comes “Home”

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Abstract: This essay explores the conceptual and practical implications of an honors forum relating to artful expression and the phenomenon of sequester in place (SIP). As monthly general education offerings for first-year students, Honors Forums feature an array of thematic events associated with the freshman cohort. Noting challenges relating to remote instruction, social distancing, and general anxiety as well as the consequent effects on the typical first-year experience, the author, an art historian, presents a novel response to COVID constraints through communal, creative expression. A visual and textual curriculum helps bring students together, mitigate pandemic-related anxieties, and introduce the honors living-learning community as home.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; creative ability; theme-based curriculum; living-learning community; Widener University (PA)—Honors Program

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BACKGROUND:

THE HONORS FORUM

For many years, the Widener University Honors Program in General Education (HPGE) has offered multiple sections of its gateway course, Freshman Honors English (ENGL 103). All incoming students take a section of this class even if they have AP credit, in which case ENGL 103 counts toward their humanities distributional requirement. One of the cornerstones of our living-learning community, the course has multiple instructors, a shared “read,” and at least one common assignment given to all sections.

ENGL 103 also connects to the designated university-wide first-year theme, and its professors interpret this umbrella topic to suit individual needs, so its overall structure allows for both commonality and individual creativity, giving variety to the offering while encouraging points of connection at the same time.

Honors Forum ties all ENGL 103 sections together. One night each month, our students convene to explore a given topic. Members find themselves mixed into new groups rather than seated with students from their own class, thus introducing participants to other members of our community and strengthening the cohort. Although we require all students to attend, a few always fail to turn up; in these circumstances, we assign an additional research paper in their 103 course—a strategy that certainly cuts down on absenteeism.

Over the years, we have tried a range of activities for this event. Past Forums have included films based on works of literature, discussions on controversial social issues (e.g., gun control, taking a knee, flag burning), guest speakers, and visiting writers. All these experiences have relied on increased interaction with fellow honors members and, since the instructors have generally linked the content of the Forum with their course, have provided learning activities tied in some way to the ENGL 103 curriculum. As program director, I am responsible for all organizational aspects of the event. When a few years ago our faculty requested that I take over both the development and delivery of the Forum so that they could focus more on their individual classroom efforts, I shifted the event to strictly art-based topics more appropriate to my background as an art historian.

The Forums I have since planned use a broad range of topics and pictorial material. Students seem to enjoy gaining a different experience from the text-based work they do in their ENGL 103 sections. I have customarily covered a variety of social and cultural issues in these visual events, everything from the art of 9/11, commemoration at home and abroad, and more recently the controversies over monuments and their removal. None of these presentations, however, gave me as much pause to devise and deliver as our most recent Forum on creativity in the age of COVID.

HONORS FORUM ON CREATIVITY IN THE AGE OF COVID

By now, all of us have had the experience of trying to educate in extraordinary circumstances. No matter how we now connect with our students—through live, hybrid, or remote teaching—we all know the toll this pandemic

has taken. Our undergraduates face a multitude of issues that go far beyond our adapted classrooms and complicate their learning. Anxiety is rampant, resulting from the mental, emotional, medical, or technological challenges they daily face. I considered whether addressing the pandemic in a Forum might merely exacerbate these worries or provide some solace, displacing some of the seemingly pervasive angst. I decided to take the risk.

My idea was to link the university's theme of "Home" with the creative output of artists responding to this unprecedented public health crisis. I began by reminding students of the themes our faculty speaker put forth in her sensitive, inspiring speech from the convocation that began the academic year. I then segued from quotations of this address to the "Stay at Home" appeal of governments and institutions worldwide as they entreated citizens to sequester in place (SIP). This theme, with its clear public-health emphasis, had proved fertile ground for visual exploration; artists immediately began creating imagery that urged shared social responsibility and made their works accessible through any means possible, such as public service announcements, online community postings, and street murals. Since these pictures often used familiar characters from popular culture, like comics or television (e.g., Superman, the Simpsons) or from famous artworks (e.g., Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Munch's *The Scream*), they directly connected with students and drew them in.

We then explored images that recognized essential workers and chronicled the plight of those who had no choice but to put themselves in harm's way during the pandemic. These poignant reminders of the privilege many of us experience as we safely distance at home added a note of social context, one that fostered a discussion of our gratitude in the midst of shared trauma and that encouraged the emotional support that students might summon in the future to combat pandemic despondency. The discussions led to a conversation about other ways we could do what artist Tagny Duff advises when she suggests that we "visualize the unknown, because it makes it less threatening and less frightening" (qtd. in Collins, 2020).

A series of witty recreations, so-called "art challenges," posted by people all over the world, followed this somber note and returned some levity to the proceedings. We considered "covers" of actual artworks created by artists who were fiercely fighting the boundaries of their SIP restrictions. I paired these "make-overs" with their "official" counterparts, drawing in even the most intransigent students who wanted nothing more than to study for the next day's chemistry test. The *pièce de résistance* that brought the house down was the "adapted" children's book covers of Stefanie Trilling (2020), which

transformed beloved classics into touchstones for our pandemic age (Trilling). Students shouted out titles of the original, recollecting the safe harbor that most had experienced during their childhood. Such a return to happier times made us all a bit wistful, but the joy, albeit temporary, had the desired effect.

Finally, I wanted to work in an activity that would engage students directly and would encourage more interaction among them through a poetry-writing exercise. My intention was to shift them from the visual to the verbal, which would, with any luck, engage students who favored text over images. By adding this component to our creative evening, I hoped not only to increase participation among those who might shy away from visual learning but also to tie the event back to ENGL 103, where every section must incorporate poetry as part of its curriculum. Such an exercise might also offer the students some psychological support as the poet Judith Adams suggests: “During this time of lockdown, poetry helps interpret challenging feelings and more importantly connects us to a more meaningful way of life this pandemic is demanding of each one of us” (2020).

Students were divided into Zoom breakout rooms, where they took on three tasks within their assigned groups, each connected to our earlier discussion on creativity and the pandemic:

For each person in your room, come up with one word per person that expresses each of these three points: (1) your individual concept of home (2) your learning experience at the university (3) your interactions with family and friends. Combine all these words to craft something cohesive together—it can be anything: a poem, a prose piece, a song, a drawing, or a map you make together to articulate the complexity of your current lives.

When the breakout groups reported to the entire Forum, the results were spectacular. Students took the interactive project seriously, some making drawings (SpongeBob SquarePants proved quite popular here) while others made short poems or word clouds they shaped into homes or hearts. We could then all take the opportunity to compare ideas and means of expression, a fruitful way of bringing the forum to a close.

Ultimately, the most significant result of the event was that students fully engaged with the material and, beyond that, clearly found the exercise cathartic. By voicing how they felt about the crisis and the way it had changed their lives, by sharing these feelings with others in their cohort, they found the discussion therapeutic. Admitting the personal consequences of COVID

meant they no longer felt isolated and alone but rather part of a community that shared common ground. With any luck, they gained a few new skills they could use to mitigate anxiety, frustration, and fear—precisely what the pandemic has generated for them—and came away with some constructive ideas they could then use to move forward in their lives.

Widener's first-year honors students have the usual high-achieving profiles. They come to us filled with ambition at this early stage of their college careers and want to cram in as much as they can possibly achieve in the time they are with us. The constraints of COVID, however, have severely challenged this characteristic enthusiasm. Remote learning, social distancing, and the lack of a typical college experience have changed the game for them. We should make any effort that will help these students foster skills that counterbalance these limitations. Whether in the form of individual support, which is deeply ingrained in the honors ethos, or with a creative evening that leaves our students with a fresh, more optimistic perspective, we have the responsibility to fight pandemic pessimism any way we can.

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